

SECOND CHANCE SUNDAY



SECONDCHANCE®
M O N T H

April is Second Chance Month

Everyone has inherent dignity and potential, but approximately **70 million Americans**—or 1 in 3 adults—have a criminal record. Though many youth with a criminal conviction have changed their values and mindsets, their records continue to limit their access to education, jobs, housing, and other things they need for a full and productive life.

In addition to widespread social stigma, there are more than **44,000 documented barriers to success** on people with a conviction. We call this situation the “second prison.” The second prison wastes human potential and adds to recidivism—the tendency of a returning citizen to re-offend—ultimately jeopardizing public safety.

Prison Fellowship® declared April 2017 as the first-ever Second Chance® Month, a national effort to reduce barriers that keep formerly incarcerated Americans from successfully rejoining society. Since 2018, April has been officially recognized as Second Chance Month by Presidents Trump and Biden, the U.S. Senate, and dozens of state governments, along with more than 600 partner organizations around the country.

Please use this resource to explore this topic as a group and examine how God might be calling your church or group to help offer second chances to those in your community.

Small Group Discussion Guide

01

Justice is an innate longing. We see the familiar arc of crime and justice in everything from children’s games to popular entertainment. If you commit a crime, the story goes, you will be arrested, tried, and sent to prison for a period of time. Justice has been served. That’s usually where the story ends, and the credits roll, but is it really the end? **Can you think of a popular story or game that portrays justice in this simplistic way? How might this formulaic understanding of justice be unrealistic or inadequate?**

02

Ministries like Prison Fellowship and others reach out to tens of thousands of men and women behind bars every month. Prisoners are introduced to a new hope and purpose for their lives through Jesus Christ, and there are dramatic stories of lives being transformed every day. **Do you know someone whose life has been dramatically changed by Jesus Christ, whether inside or outside of prison? What did this change look like?**

03

When these men and women go home after having paid their debt to society, they run into something called the “second prison.” In essence, the second prison means that a criminal conviction, no matter how far in your past it was, is never really behind you. It affects how people look at you, whether they are willing to offer you a job or lease you an apartment; whether you are welcomed at church on Sunday morning; whether you can get professional licensing; whether you are able to attain financial aid to continue your education; or many other things necessary to lead a full and productive life. **All this keeps people with a criminal record from getting back on their feet, supporting their families, or giving back to the community. Have you or someone you know experienced elements of the “second prison”? How did it hold you or them back?**



04

The bars of the second prison are far-reaching. In fact, there are more than 44,000 documented barriers to success on people with a criminal record. And this doesn't affect just a few people. It's estimated that approximately 1 in 3 American adults—including, in all likelihood, people in your church and those they love—are affected by the second prison. **Were you aware of these numbers before? Does it make you think differently about people with a criminal record, and if so, how?**

05

It makes sense for there to be some limitations on people with a criminal record, especially when those limitations are directly related to the kind of crime they committed in the past. It makes sense for someone recently convicted of money laundering and embezzlement to not have a job as an accountant. But why should someone who has overcome a drug addiction be unable to receive a loan to get their bachelor's degree? Or why should someone with a criminal record be unable to become a manicurist or barber? Many restrictions do far more harm than good. **What does it mean for the "punishment to fit the crime"? Why do you think the punishment so often does not fit the crime, at least in our modern criminal justice system?**

06

When we look to Jesus, we can see countless examples of His elevation of those who were convicted and condemned. He professed the unfaltering power of redemption in their lives. Think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, considered a sinner by the people (Luke 19:1-10). When Zacchaeus shows he has changed and is making amends—"Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor"—Christ responds by saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." When the criminal dying on the cross next to Jesus asks for Him to remember him, Christ responds by saying He will see him in paradise (Luke 23:32-43). Jesus showed no limits on redemption and saw the utmost value in each of the redeemed. **How does Christ's mercy toward Zacchaeus and the criminal on the cross challenge you? How did Jesus demonstrate mercy without forsaking justice? What might this look like in our current context?**

07

As Christians, we know and believe that the Gospel changes people. At Easter, we celebrate Christ's ultimate victory over the power of sin and death, and we celebrate a new kind of Kingdom in which the last are first, and the foolish and weak confound the wise and powerful. **Do we really believe this applies today and not just in biblical times? We love the redemption stories of Moses and Paul, who both shed blood, but are we willing to challenge the strong cultural barriers in the Church that make it difficult for similar things to happen today?**

08

In the musical *Les Misérables*, men who are in prison sing the following lines, "Look down, look down, don't look 'em in the eye. Look down, look down, you're here until you die," while Jean Valjean (prisoner number 24601 who is about to get released) and Javert, a police inspector, have the following dialogue:

Javert: "Now, prisoner 24601, your time is up, and your parole's begun; you know what that means."

Jean Valjean: "Yes, it means I'm free!"

Javert: "No! Follow to the letter your itinerary. This badge of shame you'll show until you die."

The first person to see Jean Valjean as anything other than a felon is a Catholic priest, who believes in him and commissions him to make the most of his second chance. **Prison Fellowship has declared April as Second Chance Month, a celebration of the dignity and God-given potential of each person—including those with a criminal record.** We've all got a past. We have all received forgiveness, grace, and second chances from our Heavenly Father. We are meant to be conduits of that grace to others—not to hoard it. When we participate in the restoration of the people in our community who have a criminal record, we are living out the Gospel and encouraging our brothers and sisters to make the most of their second chance.

What is something you can do today to participate in the restoration of those in your community with a criminal record? What obstacles might you have to overcome in order to do this?



Stories of Redemption

CHARLES COLSON the founder of Prison Fellowship, was known as the “hatchet man” in the Nixon White House. It was said that he would be “willing to run over his own grandmother” to achieve his desired political ends. After he became a Christian, he pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice in the Daniel Ellsberg case. He spent seven months in a federal prison camp. As a result of his newfound faith and his experiences behind bars, he founded Prison Fellowship, which soon spread across the country and throughout the world. God redeemed Colson’s past mistakes for the good of hundreds of thousands of incarcerated people and their families.

MARY KAY BEARD a bank robber, was once on the FBI’s Most Wanted List. In prison in Alabama, she came to faith in Christ. When she was released, she came on staff with Prison Fellowship as a state director. There, in the early 1980s, she began a program to deliver Christmas gifts to children with a parent in prison. That program, which was based on what Mary Kay witnessed in prison, now serves to strengthen and restore relationships between incarcerated parents and their children throughout the country. Last year alone, nearly 300,000 gifts were delivered.

DARRYL BROOKS a crack addict in Texas, cycled in and out of prison. Finally, faced with the prospect of spending a lengthy sentence behind bars, he knew he needed to make some changes. He surrendered his life to Christ and later entered an intensive Prison Fellowship program to help him overcome the roots of his criminal behavior. After he was released, he became a volunteer in the same unit. In 2016, he was invited to become its director, and now he guides dozens of men to becoming better neighbors, parents, employees, and citizens as they prepare to go home.

Videos You Can Share

Darryl’s Story: youtu.be/mhoUHLsh_0k

Rick’s Story: youtu.be/c4XjJq3YFDM

Sammy’s Story: youtu.be/2R-0U-QI0Ek

Ivy’s Story: youtu.be/gkNZ0zYLidM

Scriptures

“”

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

—2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-17

“”

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

—COLOSSIANS 3:13

“”

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

—GALATIANS 6:1-2

Closing the Group With Prayer

If your small group follows an informal model, we suggest that you set aside a special time to pray for people and families affected by the second prison.

If your church or denomination follows a more formal or liturgical model, the following prayer is suggested:

God of perfect love and mercy, look on us your children as we seek to build your kingdom in our communities. Give us the gifts we need to build one another up, to be good neighbors helping us all to meet our potential. Pour out your Holy Spirit on us that we might know your forgiveness and peace. Help us to show your mercy to one another as we seek the best you have to offer for each one of us. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

(Source: Prisons Week)



Next Steps—What You Can Do

- 01 Go to prisonfellowship.org/secondchances to learn more about how you can support second chances for people with a criminal record.
- 02 Consider introducing someone with a criminal record to a person who might be willing to hire them. Or if you own a business, consider giving them an interview.
- 03 Provide practical assistance to help people coming home become independent and successful, such as help finding work-appropriate clothing for a job interview, referrals to potential employers or landlords, and guidance on practical life skills like getting a driver's license or filing taxes.
- 04 Welcome returning citizens into your small group or church. Welcome them like any other member of your group, offering friendship and encouragement as they adjust to a post-prison life.
- 05 Get to know the families affected by crime and incarceration. Talk to your church leadership about registering for Prison Fellowship Angel Tree™ at angeltree.org.
- 06 Consider hosting a study of the *Outrageous Justice*® curriculum. *Outrageous Justice* helps followers of Jesus have a clearer understanding of criminal justice issues and take action to promote peace and restoration in their communities. This is a wonderful way for a church to learn how to bring hope and healing to those involved in the criminal justice system. To sign up and receive your free copy, visit prisonfellowship.org/outrageousjustice.
- 07 Spread the word about Second Chance Month on social media and utilize our social media toolkit that can be found at prisonfellowship.org/secondchancemonth.
- 08 Go to justicedeclaration.org to affirm your commitment to a biblical framework for our justice system by signing the Justice Declaration. Signing the Justice Declaration will allow Prison Fellowship to provide you updates on justice reforms in your state and at the federal level.
- 09 Advocate for justice reform. Prison Fellowship's Justice Ambassador program equips Christians to build relationships with lawmakers, publish letters-to-the-editor in local newspapers, host small group discussions on justice issues, and more. Apply at prisonfellowship.org/justiceambassador.